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JOSEPH RITSON

*THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS*

FOR 1921-2

Delivered at Bedford College, N.W.

January 21, 1922

BY

PROFESSOR W. P. KER

PRESIDENT, 1921-2

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BY PROFESSOR W. P. KER

English 20722 Stead

YOU have conferred on me a great honour, and imposed a very pleasant duty. I do not mean the obligation to make a speech, but the charge that will remain with me when this compulsory sermon is ended; the thought that I have been chosen one of the captains of a band of adventurers, whose province is the ocean of stories, the fortunate isles of romance, kingdoms of wonders beyond the farthest point of the voyage of Argo. The business of your president is like that of Francis Drake taking his men to the treasure-house of the world. I hope to be forgiven by the countrymen of Lope de Vega for this allusion to their enemy; there is nothing malign in it, I hope. For happily where our treasure is, there is no grudging, no chance of quarrels about sharing: each man's gain is the profit of all, and the riches multiply under the eyes of the adventurers, instead of being tucked away in hiding places on the "Dead Man's Chest." There is a spirit of youth and confidence and hope in our Society: it is only a pity that presidential formalities should hinder any of us from the real work—when I think of the books waiting to be read—the poets of Provence, the Spanish plays in their thousands, the chroniclers of Portugal, the memoirs of France. *Nos manet oceanus circumvagus*. Let us pay a visit to Mr Aubrey Bell on his Atlantic shore, where, far from committees, he spends the time happily with the *redondilhas* of Gil Vicente. And there is all the Northern region waiting; how many Englishmen have ventured into the old Laws of Norway? how many have found for themselves the value of Icelandic verse? I will go no further in this rehearsal now. But I will ask leave to make a claim and to draw a line.

I draw the line at the report addressed to the President of the Board of Education on the teaching of English. It is useful as a statement of most things which our Association does not want. It prescribes for Universities a study of language which must not go too far, and particularly not too far back; it is suspicious of Anglo-



Saxon and Middle English. It treats the student as if his salvation were all included in what he is expected to study in the "School."

If the later literature, so much easier of approach, be crowded out, the humane influence which English should exercise is only too likely never to come into play at all. It would be a mistake to sacrifice Burke and Johnson, Wordsworth and Shelley, for the sake of things of an appeal so much more remote as early language and early literature must inevitably be.

No hope, you see, for Burke and Johnson, Wordsworth and Shelley, if students, studying English, are asked to study English! The poor victim of Sweet's *Reader* is cut off from *Rasselas* and the *Present Discontents*. That is the assumption; his head is unanointed with oil; he has no time for more than his masters allow him. His pitiable case resembles that of an older day as rhymed in an Oxford poem:

Say, shall our authors from Morris to Malory  
Languish, untaught, on their several shelves?  
Say shall, for want of a reader (with salary),  
Students be forced to read Keats for themselves?

The law of our Association was not made for pupil teachers: "I hate a pupil teacher," the noble words of Milton in *Areopagitica*, might be taken for one of our impresses. If we want to learn Dutch or Danish, we set about it; we are not impeded in our grammar by any craving for soft unphilological influences. We know where to find these if we want them; as Henry Sweet himself did, a life-long lover of romance. If we are suspicious of any sort of learning, which we would not willingly be, it is the learning that asks for quick returns, that places bounds and puts up forbidding notices, "by order," where the glades open into the wood.

There is perhaps one other variety of narrow learning which may be mentioned here as a possible danger in modern research. It is that which is limited to the Degree and the Dissertation; it is at its worst in Germany and America. Our former acquaintance, Dr Aloys Brandl, once published a statement that after Goethe, the great work of Germany was the schools of research in America. The same defects may be found in both; particularly in the research commanded by the Professor, and got up by the pupil just well enough to pass, with results laboriously acquired and useful, and unutterably spiritless and disheartening to anyone who looks into them and sees how they have been compiled. I refer, for example, to a German dissertation on the life and writings of Frere which I read some time ago—a painstaking meritorious essay which had got up everything obtainable about Frere, and could not be trusted to wander an inch beyond (or even within) the understood limits of the subject. Frere was British Minister at Madrid in 1802–1804, dangerous years. Spain declared war at the end of 1804, when Godoy was the chief personage at Court: Godoy, Prince of the Peace, by his Spanish title. The German author clearly had never heard of Godoy before, and had not troubled to

read any Spanish history; he was interested in John Hookham Frere, and in nobody and nothing else, for the time, and he consequently takes the title "Prince of Peace" as part of Frere's fun—an ironical epithet for the adversary. He had of course been given to understand that Frere was a jester. This same student in modern humanities, I remember, gave proof how useful the ancient humanities may be at a pinch. Frere is Whistlecraft, the author of *The Monks and the Giants*, and our poor German commentator was pulled up in this admirable poem by the spectacle of a giant footstep with six toes:

Then to the traces of gigantic feet,  
Huge, wide apart, with half a dozen toes. (IV, 53.)

He did not take the allusion to the giants of Gath, 2 Sam. xxi. 20. A sound religious education is desirable for foreigners and others whose researches and humanities compel them to understand a British joke.

I have chosen Joseph Ritson as a theme for this afternoon; you will readily understand my motive. Ritson belonged to the great age of the adventurers, the *conquistadores*, Percy, Warton, Tyrwhitt, Scott, Ellis, Leyden, not to speak of their great contemporaries on the continent—the brothers Grimm, Ferdinand Wolf, Raynouard. Unfortunately, I have to complain that Joseph Ritson has suffered from the same kind of half-baked research as his contemporary Frere. His American biographer<sup>1</sup>, with many excellent qualities, suffers from a want of the least tincture of Ritson's spirit of curiosity. Nothing leads him out of his way: he mentions Leyden without a word of the *Complaynt of Scotland*, and his note on Ritson's *Caledonians* exhibits this information about the Picts:

The first mention of the Picts is about 300, when they are referred to by Caesar, Tacitus and others as enemies to the Britons.

Joseph Ritson, on the whole, has had less than justice. It is one of his misfortunes that Lockhart did not understand him. Many people read Lockhart's slighting and self-contradictory remarks, for one who reads Scott on Ritson.

This narrow-minded, sour, and dogmatical little word-catcher had hated the very name of a Scotsman, and was utterly incapable of sympathizing with any of the higher views of his new correspondent. Yet the bland courtesy of Scott disarmed even this half-crazy pedant; and he communicated the stores of his really valuable learning [N.B. the word-catcher had really valuable learning] in a manner that seems to have greatly surprised all who had hitherto held any intercourse with him on antiquarian topics. (Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, II, p. 62.)

Lockhart himself had not taken the trouble to find out, or to remember, what Sir Walter really thought of his quaint friend. Ritson however need not be put to shame; with Scott and Surtees to understand him, with Scott and George Ellis helping him and accepting his help, there cannot be much wrong with him. George

<sup>1</sup> *Joseph Ritson, a critical biography*, by Henry Alfred Burd (University of Illinois Studies, vol. II, No. 3, August, 1916).



Ellis translated for Ritson's *Ancient Songs* the old French lament for Simon de Montfort, MS. Harl. 2253:

In song my grief shall find relief,  
 Sad is my verse and rude,  
 I sing in tears our gentle peers  
 Who fell for England's good.  
 Our peace they sought, for us they fought,  
 For us they dared to die;  
 And where they sleep, a mangled heap,  
 Their wounds for vengeance cry.  
 On Evesham's plain is Montfort slain,  
 Well skill'd the war to guide,  
 Where streams his gore shall all deplore  
 Fair England's flower and pride.

Scott, for the same selection, translated 344 lines of the *Recollections of Chatelain*. Scott and Ellis did not find Ritson a "word-catcher," but a discoverer of the sort of precious things that they themselves enjoyed.

Joseph Ritson was a successful man; he made his fortune, and was able to help his family, particularly a nephew who was not ungrateful and who did well for his uncle's memory. He was born in 1752 at Stockton-on-Tees. Articled to a solicitor there, by the time he was twenty he seems to have learned to make the best of both worlds. Without neglecting the law, he found time for reading, and particularly for antiquarian studies. He walked to Edinburgh, and visited the Advocates' Library when he was twenty-one; he spent so much on books, including Pitscottie's *Chronicle*, that he could not pay his lodging. A stranger helped him, persuaded by Ritson's description of Flodden. He was not in those days morose; the year before 1772 he had addressed "Verseës" to the Ladies of Stockton (he spells already as in the "Romanceës" thirty years later); his poem was printed in the *Newcastle Miscellany*. About the same time he made the acquaintance of the Newcastle poet, John Cunningham. He had already, by the time he was twenty-one, all the tastes that went to make his work as a scholar and historian; he was already an antiquary, and at the same time he was a lover of literature, a servant of the Muses.

Then (end of 1775) he went to London and worked as clerk to a firm of conveyancers. How he lived it is difficult to make out; he was trusted and approved by his employers, Masterman and Lloyd; he cannot have been remiss in his conveyancing work; yet at the same time he was reading hard at the British Museum. In 1784 he was appointed High Bailiff of the Liberty of the Savoy. Jan. 25, 1786, he was granted the Patent of the office for life. He was called to the Bar from Gray's Inn, May 20, 1789. He must have had something of a conveyancing practice. At the same time he was writing legal antiquities<sup>1</sup>. And for many years he had

<sup>1</sup> *A Digest of the Proceedings of the Court Leet of the Manor and Liberty of Savoy*, 1789. *The Jurisdiction of the Court Leet*, 1791. *The Office of Constable*, 1791.

been working as an editor of old poetry, a disputant who would stand no nonsense.

In 1782 he had published one of the most characteristic of all his works; the letter to Thomas Warton, *Observations on the first three volumes of the History of English Poetry*. The cruelty of the language, the accuracy of the criticism, the ingenious malignity of the form—4<sup>o</sup>, so that it might be conveniently bound up at the end of Warton's third volume—all are Ritson. Then he turned to Shakespeare, with *Remarks Critical and Illustrative on Steevens*, and began and continued his delightful series of collections: *English Songs*, 1783; the *Bishoprick Garland or Durham Minstrel*, Stockton, 1784; *Gammer Gurton's Garland or the Nursery Parnassus*, Stockton, 1784.

The next collection had a strange fate: the *Caledonian Muse* was ready printed in 1785, when a fire destroyed the introductory matter and stopped the publication. Long afterwards, in 1821, the surviving sheets, that is to say, the poems, were published by Robert Triphook, 23 Old Bond Street.

Ritson's Essay on the author of *Christ's Kirk on the Green*, his notes and glossary, are lost.

Now this *Caledonian Muse*, printed in the year before Burns, has in it, you might say, the whole of Burns's poetical ancestry: *Peblis to the Play* and *Christ's Kirk on the Green*, the originals from which are derived *Hallowe'en* and the *Holy Fair*; Montgomerie's poem of the *Cherrie and the Slae*; and the *Élegy on Habbie Simson*, Piper of Kilbarchan. These are the three chief forms or types which in the next year were to come out at Kilmarnock. Joseph Ritson was the forerunner; his *Caledonian Muse* of 1785 was partly a symbolical vision of the antique world from which the poetical life of the Kilmarnock volume was drawn.

And so he goes on; publishing *Ancient Songs*, printed 1787, published 1792, dated 1790, and pieces of *Ancient Popular Poetry*, and all the time engaged with the Jurisdiction of the Court Leet, and the office of Constable. The *English Anthology* in three volumes appeared in 1793-94. It contains specimens of Chatterton. Ritson was not deceived by the *Rowley Poems*; neither was he prejudiced against them, as poetry.

*Scottish Songs* appeared in 1794.

So far, except for his observations on Warton and his use of MSS. for his *Ancient Songs*, Ritson had not dealt very particularly with old English literature. He had, it is true, discussed and debated many medieval questions; but so far his literary publications had been all of the nature of anthologies. He might have been mistaken for a compiler of elegant extracts; he is, plainly, a lover of many varieties of verse. His *English Anthology* is the mind of a student of poetry, who gathers all the good things he can, not as a commentator or as one supporting a thesis. In 1795 he broke new ground with his edition of Laurence Minot; and it is on his Minot and his Metrical Romances that his reputation chiefly depends as a critic of the older English language. I pass over his



*Robin Hood*, 1795, and other works, to speak more particularly of his share in the revival of Middle English studies.

This was no new thing: English philology, not in all respects harsh or crabbed, had continually been touching upon poetry and upon the popular taste. Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* are not the first of their kind: they carry on what Tonson had done in his *Poetical Miscellany*, what Gibson had accomplished in his edition of *Christ's Kirk on the Green*. By some amazing good luck it happened that the older English literature was not kept separate from polite literature of the modern fashion, nor did Greek and Latin make every mind incapable of Anglo-Saxon. The proof, almost miraculous, of this liberality, this right comprehension, is given by Frere's translation of the *Brunanburh* poem into what we now have learned from Jacob Grimm to call Middle English. Frere did this when he was a boy at Eton, it should be remembered.

George Ellis was working at the English metrical romances when Ritson came out of his seclusion to visit Scott at Lasswade. It is now for the first time that we really see Ritson; coming to Scott to get and give what he can with regard to the *Border Minstrelsy*, and also *Sir Tristrem*, it should be noted: Scott, Ellis and Ritson all at the same time are reading Middle English mss., and in their several ways making their contents accessible. How Ritson appreciated Scott is shown in his language about the presentation copy of the *Border Minstrelsy*, "the most valuable literary treasure in his possession." Scott's respect for Ritson is significantly shown in his lending Ritson Hogg's original copy of *Auld Maitland*. Writing to Ellis, Scott says: "I wish him to see it *in puris naturalibus*." In the same letter he says:

As for Mr Ritson, he and I still continue on decent terms; and in truth he makes *patte de velours*; but I dread I shall see a whisker first and then a claw, stretched out against my unfortunate lucubrations.

Scott was not quite easy in his mind over the *Border Minstrelsy*; he knew that his own methods were too free for Ritson's accuracy, too much resembling the ways of Bishop Percy.

Scott's memoir of Leyden (*Edinburgh Annual Register*, 1811) referring to Leyden's edition (1801) of the *Complaynt of Scotland* tells a characteristic story of both the humorists:

This singular work was the means of introducing Leyden to the notice and correspondence of Mr Ritson, the celebrated antiquary, who in a journey to Scotland during the next summer found nothing which delighted him so much as the conversation of the editor of the *Complaynt of Scotland*, in whose favour he smoothed down and softened the natural asperity of his own disposition. The friendship however between these two authors was broken off by Leyden's running his Border hobbyhorse a full tilt against the Pythagorean palfrey of the English antiquary. Ritson, it must be well remembered, had written a work against the use of animal food; Leyden, on the other hand, maintained it was part of a masculine character to eat whatever came to hand, vegetable or animal, cooked or uncooked; and he concluded a tirade to this purpose by eating a raw beef steak



before the terrified antiquary, who never afterwards could be prevailed upon to regard him except as a kind of learned ogre. This breach, however, did not happen till they met in London, previous to Leyden's leaving Britain.

Leyden sailed for the East Indies in April 1803.

Another characteristic story is given in Scott's *Essay on Border Antiquities*, speaking of the Roman Wall, and particularly of Glenwhelt near Gilsland Spaw:

Its height may be guessed from the following characteristic anecdote of the late Mr Joseph Ritson, whose zeal for accuracy was so marked a feature in his investigations. That eminent antiquary, upon an excursion to Scotland, favoured the author with a visit. The wall was mentioned, and Mr Ritson, who had been misinformed by some ignorant person at Hexham, was disposed strongly to dispute that any relics of it yet remained. The author mentioned the place in the text, and said there was as much of it standing as would break the neck of Mr Ritson's informer were he to fall from it. Of this careless and metaphorical expression Mr Ritson failed not to make a memorandum, and afterwards wrote to the author that he had visited the place with the express purpose of jumping down from the wall, in order to confute what he supposed a hyperbole. But he added, that, though not yet satisfied that it was quite high enough to break a man's neck, it was of elevation sufficient to render the experiment very dangerous.

Ritson's most elaborate piece of research, *Annals of the Caledonians, Picts and Scots, and of Strathclyde, Galloway and Murray*, was published by his nephew in 1828. Scott reviewed it in the *Quarterly Review* for July 1829. It is the old debate between Sir Arthur Wardour and Mr Jonathan Oldbuck, whether the Picts were Celtic or Gothic. Scott was never fully convinced that the Gothic theory was impossible, but he had to surrender most of the Antiquary's positions. Ritson's argument is a collection from all available authorities of all the relevant passages: it is the method of Wilhelm Grimm in his *Deutsche Heldensage*. Scott salutes him:

George Chalmers raised a banner against Pinkerton on the other side, and long previous to the publication of his great work of *Caledonia*—a work unequalled, if we consider it as a mass of materials assembled by the labour of a single man—Joseph Ritson, an antiquary of the first order, had embraced the same side with much vehemence. Of this last writer we may say with justice, that allowing for a certain portion of irritability (a constitutional *disease*) he possessed in a degree surpassing his contemporaries the patience, the ardour, and the industry necessary for antiquarian researches. He was firm and somewhat obstinate in his opinions, as was natural in one who had adopted them after much thought. But he piqued himself on the most profound honesty in research and quotation, and if you brought him sufficient evidence to convince him of his error, he was the first to avow his conviction to the world. His violence, though often to be regretted, was always sincere and unaffected; while that of Pinkerton was suspected by some of his friends to be in a great measure assumed, for the sake of attracting attention.

We are now at the end of the story. Ritson's active mind and

irritable soul wore out long before old age: he died Sept. 23, 1803, a few days short of fifty-one years. His best epitaph is by Scott, who reviewed Ritson's *Romances*, 1802, and Ellis's *Specimens of Romance*, 1805, together, in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1806. Ritson's favourite subject for dissertation was Minstrelsy, partly through direct interest, and partly through opposition to Percy. Scott takes occasion to expostulate with Ritson over his violent language in controversy:

Surely neither the gallant Sir Lancelot nor the courteous Sir Gawain would have given a reverend Bishop the lie direct, on account of a disputed reading in the old song of *Maggie Lauder*.

On the main question of Minstrelsy Scott has a discovery to announce. It is strange to think that Ritson died before Scott had finished his study of Thomas the Rhymer; before he found in the Lincoln MS. of Thomas of Erceldoune the proof that "tongue is chief of minstrelsy." Ritson all his life had maintained the opposite; that minstrels were not poets but only jugglers and harpers. Scott quotes:

Harping, he said, ken I non,  
For tong is chefe of mynstrelsie,

and continues:

From this decisive declaration which a poet and minstrel made on the nature of his own profession, it appears plainly that in more ancient times the minstrel's principal and most honourable occupation referred to poetry rather than music, and the Rhymer might have been justly described as one "who united the arts of poetry and music and sang verses to the harp of his own composing," if he had not disdained the musical skill to which it was Mr Ritson's persuasion that the talents of the minstrel were exclusively limited. We should have been anxious to have heard what reply his keen and eager spirit could have suggested; but poor Ritson is probably now deciphering the characters upon the collar of Cerberus, or conversing in unbaptized language with the Saxon and British chiefs of former times,

"With Oswald  
Vortigern, Harold, Hengist, Horsa, Knute  
Allured, Edgar and Cunobeline."

Upon the whole it occurs to us from a careful perusal of this essay that Mr Ritson's talents were better adapted to research than to deduction, to attack than to defence, to criticism than to composition; and that he has left us a monument of profound industry and extensive study, undirected by any attempt at system, and tarnished by the splenetic peculiarities of an irritable temperament. Still, let it be remembered to his honour that, without the encouragement of private patronage or of public applause; without hopes of gain and under the certainty of severe critical censure, he has brought forward such a work on national antiquities as in other countries has been thought worthy of the labour of universities and the countenance of princes.

When this was written *Annals of the Caledonians* had not been published: the *Life of King Arthur*, 1825, has also to be added to the list of Ritson's works: Scott in 1806 did not know all that Ritson had done. His praise of Ritson will remain unchallenged, and will bear testing: we need not try to improve on it.

W. P. KER.







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